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C O N F I D E N T I A L RANGOON 000248

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/21/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [KISL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: COMMUNAL RIOTS IN MAGWAY DIVISION

REF: A. 04 RANGOON 1497

[B](#). 03 RANGOON 1361

Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Communal rioting erupted between Buddhist and Muslim communities in central Burma on February 16. Sources report that three people died and ten others sustained injuries as Buddhist Burmans attacked Muslim and Indian shops, homes, and mosques. Authorities imposed a news blackout and curfews in the region in an effort to prevent a spread to other regions, as happened after similar communal riots in 2003. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Embassy sources corroborated international media reports that rioting erupted between Buddhist and Muslim/Indian communities in Magway Division in central Burma on February 16. Following rumors that Muslim men had allegedly raped a Burman woman near Sinbyukyun town, ethnic Burmans attacked and torched Muslim and ethnic Indian homes, shops, and mosques. The rioting and looting spread to other towns on February 17 and 18, including Chauk, about 25 miles south of Bagan. According to media reports, local security forces initially did not intervene, but as the violence spread authorities imposed a strict curfew in several towns.

[1](#)3. (C) An Embassy source said that authorities arrested 17 people in Sinbyukyun, including four NLD members. The same source said that police arrested 55 persons in Chauk, most of whom were Muslim. Unofficial sources claimed that three people died in the riots and another 10 were injured.

ANOTHER VERSION

[1](#)4. (C) According to a Muslim cleric contact in Rangoon, it was not a rape, but an ethnic misunderstanding that sparked the riots. A Muslim-operated taxi did not stop when the lone Burman woman passenger asked to get off. The driver was reportedly listening to music through earphones and did not hear her. When the vehicle did not stop, the woman panicked, jumped off the moving vehicle, and broke her leg. Burman sources claimed, instead, that Muslim youths had raped the local woman, the daughter of a prominent Buddhist abbot, and dropped her along the roadside to die. Assuming the latter, local ethnic Burman men commenced reprisal attacks against Muslims and South Asians.

[1](#)5. (C) COMMENT: In October 2003, similar communal riots between Buddhist and Muslims in Kyaukse, Mandalay Division rapidly spread to other parts of the country (reftels). The GOB reacted more quickly this time, but the incident reveals underlying tense inter-ethnic relations in the heartland. As a result of the regime's tight control of information, rumormongering takes on added importance. Rumormongering combined with ethnic tensions makes single incidents all the more combustible and likely to spread. END COMMENT.

VILLAROSA